

Dogs Trained to Help People With Disabilities

By Mary Alice Powell

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Throughout Lucas, Defiance, Williams, Wood, Fulton, Henry and Ottawa counties in northwest Ohio a group of graduates with unique degrees are helping people with disabilities.

Because their positions were waiting for them, they could begin work shortly after graduation.

Daily they receive gratitude, love and cookies for a job well done – be it as simple as picking up the phone or taking the clothes out of the dryer.

These may sound like trite tasks, but to people with disabilities such assistance often means are able to live in their own homes.

The hundreds of trained dogs throughout northwest Ohio graduated from The Ability Center of Greater Toledo's Assistance Dogs for Achieving Independence program.

The program is one of several that the center offers to help those with disabilities gain independence and mobility.

"This program provides the training and placement of service and therapy dogs to assist individuals with disabilities," Mallory Crooks, public relations manager, explains.

However, Seeing Eye dogs for the blind are not part of the program.

The center's campus is located in Sylvania, Ohio, in Lucas County, but the services stretch into six other counties and include satellite offices in Bryan (Williams County) and Defiance (Defiance County.)

New Training Quarters

The dog assistance program recently was moved into spacious new quarters that came with a price tag of \$1.4 million, made possible mostly through donations.

The stunning new building at the rear of the center campus is shared space with Agility Angels, a local dog training program for individuals diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder to interact with dogs.

Agility Angels was founded by Kim Holmes, a professional dog trainer, and Melissa Voetsch, whose son was diagnosed with autism.

Kim is president of the Angels and is the director of the training program for assistance dogs.

I had the privilege of touring the new facility and meeting some of the canines that were nearing graduation along with the volunteers who are instrumental in the Assistance Dogs for Achieving Independence program.

The one-of-a-kind facility is designed with spacious training areas and includes a conference room, but the large room that is furnished as a model apartment is the main attraction for dog aficionados.

The apartment furnishings that simulate the home where the dog will live with its owner are the training tools that teach them to activate access buttons and switches, carry items, open doors and pick up dropped items.

Training props in the apartment includes a bed that's made up with sheets and a blanket and next to the bed is a telephone setting on a night stand.

A laundry dryer and a shower stall are also included in the apartment.

If needed, the dog can be trained to open the dryer door, remove the clothes, put them into a basket and take it to the owner.

Dining Etiquette

A table and chairs in the apartment has nothing to do with meal time, it's used as part of the dog's training to go under the table and stay there when eating at a restaurant.

The dog's final examination is with the prospective owner who comes to the apartment to learn the commands and bond with the dog that's trained to be his/her best friend and assistant.

The owner spends two weeks working with the dog in the apartment.

Since lodging is not provided by The Ability Center, the person has the choice of returning home each day or staying in a Toledo motel.

A demonstration in the apartment by Star, a handsome, black two year old lab, and trainer Kim Holmes not only proved he learned his lessons well, but he was ready to graduate and begin his new life with new people in a new

home.

And, yes, Star showed his appreciation for the cookies Kim pulled from her pocket each time he responded to her command on queue.

Star obeyed Kim's command to lift the telephone off the receiver, by gripping an added attachment on the phone in his mouth.

In the home situation, the phone would then have been delivered to the owner.

In another command bedside, he quickly pulled back the bedspread and other coverings that would be helpful to a person with disabilities.

Basic Needs

In addition to basic lessons that are needed by the average person with a disability, the dog's training is customized to meet specific needs.

The person's needs are expressed at the time the assistance dog is requested, then again during the two week trial, and a third time when Kim visits the home two months after the dog and owner have lived together.

From being a puppy to becoming a trained assistance dog takes two years.

During those two years the dog is placed in a foster home for nine months to a year.

The fostering of the dogs is done by the many valuable volunteers at The Ability Center who serve in various capacities.

The fostering responsibility includes training the dog house manners, basic obedience and public socialization.

If the foster dog fails the program, they are first offered for adoption to the volunteer who trained them... it's not unusual for them to be adopted by the foster "parent" due to the strong bond they have developed.

Auxiliary Help

Members of The Ability Center Auxiliary are included in the large fleet of volunteers the center depends on.

Last year the auxiliary adopted a dog named Madison that has since graduated from the training.

The auxiliary's largest monetary contribution comes from the *Annual Style Show*, a major social event in Toledo.

The show draws more than 400 ticket holders and raises thousands of dollars for the center.

100th Anniversary

The Ability Center, founded as the Society for Crippled Children, is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year and recently marked the occasion at a community celebration.

In the 2018 annual report, Timothy Harrington, who has been executive director 20 years, was anticipating the 2020 celebration.

"We're looking to the future while honoring our agency's roots.

"Events will be held throughout the year to highlight our rich history of service, evolution as an agency, and our role in creating a disability-friendly community in the region."

In addition to the assistance dogs, other services provided by The Ability Center are equally impressive and appreciated by those with disabilities who have improved their lives because of them.

The six core services include:

- Advocacy
- Information and referral
- Independent living skills
- Peer support and mentoring
- Transition,
- Diversion to support those in our community to thrive independently.

The *advocacy program* is explained as helping create systematic change at the local, state, and federal levels to protect disability rights.

Information and referral provides information on disability-related issues and community resources that assist individuals to live independently.

The *independent living skills* programming aims to increase skills which can help consumers gain more control of

their lives and live independently in the community.

Training classes include financial management, cooking and counseling.

The *support* and *mentoring* program reinstates The Ability Center's belief in the importance of peer support and the strength it provides.

Mentors provide shared experiences, feelings and awareness of disability issues.

In the *transition* program, people with disabilities are helped to move out of nursing homes or institutions.

Diversions, the sixth core program, helps individuals to avoid institutional placement and navigate to community based living.

Other services The Ability Center provides cover the basic needs of the person with disabilities.

The center's equipment loaning services provide individuals with temporary disability-related equipment with 940 pieces of equipment being loaned in 2018.

Another service addresses the need for those with disabilities to modify their homes making them more accessible.

In 2018, the center helped with 153 home improvements

In addition to a capable staff, The Ability Center is governed by a board of directors.

To keep the understanding and needs of the people with disabilities close in heart and programming, 51% of the staff and board of directors are individuals living with disabilities.

Tim, the executive director, is included in that percentage.

Tim believes, "Helping people with disabilities is a community wide responsibility.

"Every citizen has a role in creating a community that is disability friendly.

"Our work begins by connecting people to opportunities."

Note: Farmland News would like to thank The Ability Center for sharing their story.

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